

Testimony of Kenneth R. Weinstein
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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the impact that the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and United States international media has around the world. We as a nation need to remain vigilant to the ways in which information and ideas, as well as disinformation and false ideologies, affect our national security, and I thank the Committee for holding today's hearing. I am pleased to join my colleagues, BBG Chairman Jeff Shell and CEO John Lansing, at today's hearing.

I have served as a Board Member on the Broadcasting Board of Governors since October 2013 and as the President and CEO of the Hudson Institute since March 2011. As a political theorist who has spent the past few decades working on U.S. foreign policy and its impact in Asia, the Middle East and Europe, I have had the opportunity to analyze the strategic context, direction, and efficacy of both U.S. foreign policy and US civilian international media.

Today, I will describe the overall operating context for BBG international media, examine some of the challenges and opportunities inherent in that context, and note important ways that BBG reporting is impacting audiences in support of U.S. foreign policy and freedom in this space.

US international media operates in an environment of rapid geopolitical change and growing instability in world affairs. Last week's horrific terror attacks in Paris are just the latest example of the challenging international environment, and one in which tragic events in one country are increasingly linked to those in others.

The broad features of recent geopolitical change include Russia's aggression in Ukraine; the spread of ISIS and other jihadist groups in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia and now, alas, Western Europe; Iran's growing tentacles in the Middle East; economic slowdown in China, and growing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

This geopolitical instability and rising threat level occurs at a time of mass technological innovation, reducing the costs for communication to both large and targeted audiences. Across the globe, the enemies of liberty have become increasingly adept at marshaling the same cost-effective technologies that make the

dissemination of information much less expensive today than it has ever been in human history.

Against this backdrop of geopolitical evolution, both elite and public opinion has proven ill-prepared about how to react to unprecedented policy change. At this time of uncertainty, state propaganda agencies have stepped into the breach, making what Peter Pomerantsev of the Legatum Institute termed the “weaponization of information” a central facet of international conflict.

The enemies of free societies – both state and non-state actors – have become increasingly skilled at “weaponization of information,” aggressively using the tools of a free society, including the media and social media, to distort reality, and defend the indefensible: tyranny, kleptocracy, murder, religious intolerance and pre-modern visions of human society that deny fundamental human rights. They do so pro-actively, with creativity and attention to production value and a targeting of audiences that is far more sophisticated than the Soviet Union ever did, thereby weakening intellectual and moral opposition to their policies abroad, highlighting shortcomings of Western societies through a distorted lens, or fomenting anti-Western sentiment at home to justify inexcusable actions by their governments abroad.

Well-funded state propaganda outlets designed to have the patina of impartial media outlets include Russia’s RT, Sputnik, Ruptly, Rossiya Segnodnya, and other secondary platforms, which according to State Department estimates spends over \$1.4 billion annually on propaganda. The Columbia Journalism Review estimates that CCTV’s English language efforts will be nineteen times the annual budget of the BBC, the world’s largest news organization. According to *The Atlantic*, Al Jazeera spent \$1 billion to start Al Jazeera English and the network gets \$100 million for its annual budget. These differing platforms target specific audiences, especially in the West, seeking to undermine the possibility of a firm and united Western response to current policy crises.

A second major challenge the BBG faces is the transnational power of and appeal of groups such as ISIS. As predictable political borders have eroded, so have the traditional boundaries that once shaped the media landscape. Today, communities and conversations arise in a digital space without geographic limitation, and technology massively compresses the time and space needed for disinformation and influence to spread.

Social media and the Internet have proven fertile ground, not just for Russian disinformation but also for spreading Islamic radicalism, free from the more truthful filter of traditional journalism. Through social media, ISIS, itself in competition with other radical Islamist groups, projects a romanticized vision of life under the Caliphate to disaffected men and women in Western Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Teenagers in Britain, Turkey or Saudi Arabia may follow the dictates of radical Imams on YouTube and abandon the comforts of home for war-torn regions of Syria or Iraq.

These trends have important ramifications for how BBG, and others, target our intended audiences. Information-seeking communities and individuals get news updates not solely through established media outlets in limited geographical locations, but through their preferred information platforms. CEO Lansing will speak to this issue in greater detail in his testimony, so I will simply note here that moving forward we must continue to embrace digital and social media tools as key platforms for our content, as these are the tools that our priority markets – youths and future influencers – already use on a regular basis.

A second challenge is the sheer volume of available media and the effect that has on how global audiences consume information and, ultimately, make social, economic, and political decisions. Every day, global communities are awash in information. But not all information is created equal. From Crimea, to Syria, Northern Nigeria, and Southeast Asia, propaganda and censorship foment hate and confusion, monitor and suppress dissent, activate acts of terror and roll back hard-won freedoms. Actors from ISIL to China to Russia are using information not just to “win the news cycle,” but to shape the very choices of statecraft.

This current context stands in stark contrast to the Cold War, during which certain global actors sought to prevent the flow of information to the point of creating vacuums in key communities, which the United States moved to fill with reporting through Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and other tools. Today, we see the opposite: an abundance of false, doctored, or misleading information on a multitude of different platforms for consumption.

A key BBG challenge is ensuring that our high-quality reporting serves as a beacon for accurate, fact-based journalism in spaces awash with dishonest, misleading, or government-controlled information. In environments inundated with propaganda or falsehood, the best antidote is objective, fact-based reporting that arms citizens with the truth.

As such, BBG's global reach and journalistic credibility play a vital role in correcting falsehoods, holding people and institutions accountable, and demystifying U.S. policy in these communities.

Along these lines, I would like to touch on three key areas where the BBG is operating with impact in the modern media space.

Responding to Russia

The Kremlin is actively using propaganda and disinformation as a tool of foreign policy and to maintain support at home. To counter Russian propaganda, the BBG engages key audiences inside Russia, along the Russian periphery, and globally to provide them with the realities about Russian and U.S. activities and, importantly, their context. As elsewhere, we have an appreciation of different audiences that we seek to reach, and want our audiences to be empowered by facts, the most effective strategy for countering propaganda.

Since the fall of the Yanukovich government in Ukraine in February 2014, and the ensuing occupation and attempted annexation of Crimea and Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, the BBG has dramatically increased programming to the region. Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) have added or expanded more than 35 new programs on multiple media platforms in Russian, Ukrainian, and other languages to reach new audiences in Ukraine, Russia, elsewhere in the former Soviet space, and around the world.

U.S. International Media are a real force in Ukraine, as I have seen from my travels there. We have every reason to be proud of our journalists. We have every reason to be proud of our journalists in the field. Our coverage of the protests on the Maidan was unparalleled and our brave journalists at RFE/RL remained on the job in the face of intimidation and physical violence; their continuous and fact-based reporting of violence perpetrated by forces loyal to the Yanukovich government was critical to Ukraine's democratic revolution. Our journalists, whether at RFE/RL or Voice of America, are widely respected as among the best in the business, and our diverse programming, which at times has aired programs critical of the Poroshenko government, has broad appeal.

The BBG's response to Russian propaganda represents five broad lines of effort:

- Focus programming to impact strategic audiences

- Expand partnerships to reach audiences in local markets and influence the news agenda
- Move resources to digital platforms to directly engage audiences
- Increase research on the ground to better understand audiences and impact
- Utilize BBG capabilities and expertise to meet unfilled strategic needs and opportunities

The BBG is already seeing strong impact in the region. More than 500 Central Asia media outlets have already subscribed to RFE/RL's Central Asia news wire service, which launched in September in Russian and vernacular languages. Voice of America and RFE/RL programs are now carried on more than 120 television, radio and internet outlets in Ukraine.

RFE/RL continues to ramp up DIGIM, its new social-media driven digital reporting and engagement service, which includes the "Footage vs. Footage" feature, a daily video product that contrasts how Russian media and global media report on the same events, provides the facts of a case and pointing out inconsistencies and falsehoods in Russian reporting.

Additionally, RFE/RL and Voice of America have expanded *Current Time*, their popular daily 30-minute Russian-language television news program into Central Asia. It is now on the air in nine countries via 25 media outlets, and *Current Time* is available to digital audiences worldwide. In Russia, where placement on domestic stations is not possible, *Current Time* is available on NewsTube.ru, Russia's largest news site. Our new research shows that nearly two million people in Russia are watching *Current Time* weekly online, and that it is most popular among 15-24 year olds.

Through these programs we engage the audience's – often silently held – interests and concerns. Russians, for instance, are considering whether their country is heading in the right direction. They are weighing whether Putin's political and social reality is where they want to raise their children, start or grow a business, get an education; these are core questions that speak to hopes and aspirations. In other words, the future media environment is not just about countering Kremlin propaganda, but a campaign for the future of the region.

It is worth noting that the BBG is not solely engaged in reporting in this area; we also provide equipment and journalism training to key populations. For example, following consultations in June with Ukrainian authorities and our Department of State, BBG provided broadcasting transmission equipment to Ukraine to facilitate

delivery of radio and television programs to audiences in areas controlled by Russia or Russian-backed separatists. The equipment: a new, 134-meter tower; a 60 kW solid state Medium Wave transmitter; and three portable FM stations, will be used as part of a low-power network to be deployed near contested areas.

Covering Violent Jihadi Movements

Extremist narratives too often go unaddressed within local media environments and digital echo chambers. These narratives are often tied to extremists' alleged religious virtue and organizational invincibility, with a toxic additive of anti-American and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

Our journalism exposes the gap between rhetoric and reality – ideologically and organizationally – of violent jihadist groups. We do this through objective reporting that adheres to the highest standards of professional journalism. By covering violent extremism, we expose it for what it is.

Extremist groups have excelled at re-centering the news cycle on their violence. To counter this tactic, the BBG is pursuing several strategic goals in this space:

- Delegitimize extremism by reporting on and exposing the realities of extremist groups
- Make communities more resilient to extremism through engagement
- Promote diverse voices in the Muslim community otherwise overlooked in biased media environments

While other parts of the government directly support civil society, the BBG is uniquely positioned to elevate moderate voices – from the street to the elites. We cover local issues of concern, and provide constructive outlets for communities to discuss the issues that matter to them.

For example, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks' (MBN) "Raise Your Voice" campaign continues to successfully encourage citizens across the Middle East to speak out and be a part of the discussion about the fight against extremism. As a result, MBN has seen a large surge in digital traffic and on social media; in last four months over 590,000 votes have been cast on daily "Raise Your Voice" polls and MBN has 6.2 million followers on Facebook.

As part of the "Raise Your Voice" campaign, MBN launched "*Delusional Paradise*" in September, a weekly 30-minute documentary series comprised of

firsthand accounts of families who have suffered at the hands of ISIL. This is precisely the kind of work the BBG should be doing: “*Delusional Paradise*” presents powerful firsthand and deeply moving accounts and interviews of families and communities that have suffered at the hands of ISIL. The program includes chilling interviews with families who have lost loved ones to ISIL recruitment, and compelling interviews with families victimized by ISIL attacks, including an interview with Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh’s family after he was burned to death by ISIL.

Internet Freedom

A third prominent challenge for us is the fundamental importance of information freedom. This is an enduring and central role for the BBG, from the Cold War to today.

Today, information freedom means the unfettered ability for people around the world to engage and connect with one another, to be informed, and ultimately to use that information to change their lives and the lives of their community for the better.

In 2002, the BBG created the Internet Anti-Censorship Program (or “IAC” program) to accomplish two major goals. The first is to support journalists, bloggers, civil society actors and activists to use the Internet safely and without fear of interference. The second is to empower world citizens to have access to modern, unrestricted communication channels and to allow them to communicate without fear of repressive censorship or surveillance.

Using funds provided by Congress for censorship circumvention programs, our International Broadcasting Bureau funds large scale proxy servers, such as Psiphon, and other means to defeat censorship. The BBG’s investment and support of multiple circumvention technologies has helped to create a new generation of mobile apps that directly challenge and overcome the powerful government-enforced firewalls of Iran and China. Our web proxy servers allow more than one billion Internet sessions a day. Users from the Middle East, North Africa, Eurasia and East Asia are able to access news and information outside of their tightly controlled information markets.

Through our Open Technology Fund, we underwrite apps and programs for computers and mobile devices that help to encrypt communications and evade censorship. OTF’s approach to identify and support next-generation internet

freedom technologies has led to the development of first-of-its kind tools that encrypt text messages and mobile phone calls, detect mobile phone censorship and intrusion efforts, and allow transfer of data without use of the internet or mobile networks. Such efforts allow users facing constantly changing censorship methods to continue to communicate safely online.

We are seeing major success in this area. The BBG has internet freedom tools working in 200 languages. BBG/OTF's tools have supported nearly 1 trillion circumvention page views over the past year and the delivery of over 1 billion emails and newsletters delivered behind the Great Firewall of China every year. BBG currently provides the fastest Internet connectivity in Cuba, via satellite.

The success of our Internet Freedom work is at the core of our role as journalists and reflects our unique capabilities within the U.S. government. In the digital era, the freedom to speak and the freedom to listen remain essential. With the support of Congress, we aim to rapidly expand our presence and operations in this area.

Examples of Other Areas of Impact

The above cases are just a few examples of BBG's powerful impact in areas that are critical to U.S. foreign policy. But they are by far not the only instances. Some are more targeted but highly critical.

For example, in Nigeria, the eradication of polio was halted by rumors and misinformation about the safety of international vaccination programs. In response, Voice of America partnered with the Centers for Disease Control to carry out a multi-year campaign of reporting, Public Service Announcements, town hall meetings, and media trainings. In part due to our work to eliminate falsehoods surrounding the transmission of and vaccination against polio, Nigeria was just last month removed from the CDC's list of countries with endemic polio.

During protests and an attempted coup sparked by Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to run for a third term, the government targeted independent media, forcibly closing down all privately-owned radio stations. However, VOA remains on the air via an owned-and-operated FM station in the capital, Bujumbura, which can be heard in most of the small country, as well as in refugee camps in Tanzania and the DRC. VOA is now one of the only available sources of news and information in Kirundi – the only language spoken by nearly all Burundians – as well as French and Swahili.

And, earlier this year, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud contacted VOA's Somali Service to thank it for broadcasting a series on democratic constitution-making that he said was extremely valuable in his country's constitutional drafting conference in January 2014.

In conclusion, at a time of rapid geopolitical change and significant technological evolution, there are many new and unprecedented challenges in the global information space. In the face of these challenges, and with budgets that are far exceeded by those of our geostrategic competitors, the Broadcasting Board of Governors is having significant impact in some of the most difficult locations on earth. The Board views these successes as a foundation to build on and we hope that the Committee will remain cognizant of our growing success as it considers potential reforms.